

GREGG, DAVID M<sup>c</sup>MURTRE

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# Civil War Officers Union

David McMurtrie Gregg

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# David McMurtrie Gregg

*This capable officer was not as ruthless as Sheridan or as dashing as Stuart, but his calmness in battle made him one of the Union's most dependable horsemen*

*By Russell F. Weigley*

WHEN combative Gen. James H. Wilson spoke extravagantly of his fellow officers, it was more often to blame than to praise them. Upon the death of David McMurtrie Gregg, however, Wilson wrote of him to his son George S. Gregg: "I regarded him as *in every way the best cavalry general of the war*, and worthy of the highest command."

Under less emotional circumstances, when writing his own memoirs, Wilson expressed a more restrained but not a markedly different view: "... in General David McM. Gregg, who commanded the Second Division, the cavalry had one of its very best officers. He had always belonged to that branch of the service and was noted for sterling ability and great experience. Steady as a clock and as gallant as Murat, it has been often said that he was the best all 'round cavalry officer that ever commanded a division in either army."

Despite plaudits from an officer who rarely awarded praise, Gregg remains a vague, even blurred figure in the history of Civil War cavalry. For one brief moment he stood at stage center, hurling his squadrons in countercharge against Jeb Stuart's on the cavalry field east of Gettysburg. But even then there fell across him the long shadow of George Armstrong Custer, and no second

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opportunity to play so central a role offered itself. Those of us who have often browsed through *The Photographic History of the Civil War* may recall him as a patriarchally bearded figure sitting amidst the usual awkwardly posed staff. A few of us, who grew up in his latter-day home town of Reading in Pennsylvania, know his equestrian statue by Augustus Lukeman at a prominent intersection and can remember wondering why it was there; or we have heard older men's memories of him as the tall (6 feet 1½ inches), slender, white-bearded, even awesome local elder (for he lived until 1916). But for most, all that Gregg suggests is Gettysburg and a photograph or two, nothing more.

OF COURSE, Gregg failed to impress himself upon posterity, partly for the simple and unfortunate reason that among cavalry commanders who wore plumed hats and rode accompanied by banjo players, or who affected velvet uniforms and wore their golden hair long, or who found their way into misleading verse about rides from Winchester 20 miles away, he was a solid citizen who did nothing of the sort. He was so quietly modest that the characteristic is almost sure to be mentioned in anyone's recollections of him. He had a reputation for reserve even as a West Point cadet; "he seemed to live within an invisible circle," his son wrote, "over the boundaries of which but few were allowed to trespass." He would not allow newspapermen near his headquarters. These characteristics helped keep him almost anonymous. On

← ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE—As this photograph from the collections of the Library of Congress indicates, David McMurtrie Gregg was a placid man. He was thorough and dependable but otherwise a totally different type from the dashing Sheridan.

Continued on Next Page





Continued from Preceding Page

the other hand, a cavalryman such as John Buford was equally solid and undramatic, yet he retains a hold upon our memories that Gregg lacks. Thus we are all the more likely to pause in surprise over the fulsome praise of James Wilson. What was there in Gregg to merit Wilson's encomiums?

The record seems to reveal that there were many things—though it also suggests a few causes for doubt. To cite one solid virtue, David Gregg was a thoroughgoing cavalryman, in a Cavalry Corps many of whose top commanders had transferred from infantry, like Phil Sheridan, or even from the Corps of Engineers, like Wilson. Gregg knew cavalry tactics as thoroughly as any man in the Union armies, and he knew the care of horses and of horse soldiers. As a boy in Bellefonte, Pa., he often slipped away to the stable yard of a local hotel, looking for an opportunity to ride. When he was about 12 he and a brother were good enough horsemen that they were allowed to ride two of the family animals on a journey of 60 miles. At West Point, where Gregg was a pretty good cadet generally, graduating eighth in the 1855 class of 34, he was outstanding as a horseman. His graduating rank allowed him to opt for a lieutenancy in the dragoons. He received a brevet in the 2d Dragoons upon graduation and a commission in the 1st Dragoons the following September. He worried at the Academy that though he could ride well he lacked the strength of wrist to excel with the saber, but in his second action against the Indians of the Snake River country he cleft the skull of a brave who charged him.

**HIS SEASONING** included a full range of adventures in the West: enduring the cold blast of a "norther" that swept down upon his company as it crossed the Great Plains on his first western journey, thirsting across the Arizona and California deserts from Tucson through Yuma to Fort Tejon near Los Angeles, leading a troop without mishap from Fort Tejon to Fort Vancouver while

**CAVALRY ACTION**—Brandy Station was a cavalry battle such as this one from Edwin Forbes' "Army Sketch Book." In this pivotal action where the Federal cavalry demonstrated it could fight Jeb Stuart's horsemen on even terms, Gregg let slip an opportunity to strike the main Confederate cavalry force a decisive blow from the rear.

a green lieutenant though the only officer on the march, and tangling with the Palouse, Spokanes, and Coeur d'Alenes in the 1858 campaign along the Snake and Spokane Rivers.

A characteristic story of Gregg as a cavalryman concerns an unruly mount that nearly ran away with him at the embarrassing moment of a review of his division by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. Though the horse almost disrupted the proceedings, and though Gregg then learned that an earlier master had rid himself of the beast after it had thrown him, Gregg kept the horse to conquer it and ride it in battle for more than a year.

**GREGG**, a thorough cavalryman, was capable of displaying the cavalryman's traditional boldness. His boldness was partly the daring of youth, for despite his flowing beard he was only 32 at the close of the war. He was a product of a Scots warrior family, with a military tradition reaching back in verifiable records to a captain of Cromwell's army and in legend going far beyond. The beginning of the Civil War brought him to Washington City and a captaincy in the 3d Cavalry, which presently became the 6th. But Gregg found the Capital an unhealthy place after his years in the clear air of Washington Territory, and he spent the last months of 1861 bedded down with typhoid. When he returned to duty, his first cousin, Gov. Andrew Gregg Curtin of Pennsylvania, helped get him the colonelcy of that state's 8th Cavalry Regiment, and he rose rapidly in the wartime army. Serving creditably on the Peninsula and in the Maryland Campaign, he inherited George D. Bayard's brigade—then the only organized cavalry brigade with the Army of the Potomac—when Bayard was mortally wounded at Fredericksburg. By the spring of 1863, under





